

Early History

The Town of Faison was settled on land granted to Henry Faison on July 2, 1776. When the Atlantic Coast Line Railroad was built, it had its only curve at the crossroads in this little town. The village was first called Faison Depot, but later became known as the Town of Faison

Faison Historic District (Reference: Family Tree Builder)

The Faison Historic District was listed on the [National Register of Historic Places](#) in 1997. Portions of the content on this web page were adapted from a copy of the original nomination document. [†] Adaptation copyright © 2011, The Gombach Group.

Description

The Faison Historic District comprises one industrial block and thirty complete and partial commercial and residential blocks in the town of Faison, situated in the northwest corner of Duplin County, North Carolina. The region is situated in the coastal plain where the generally level terrain and clayey loam soil composition are well-suited for agricultural farming. The land is drained on the south by Reedy Branch, and on the north and east by Goshen Swamp which forms the headwaters of the Northeast Cape Fear River. The river flows in a southerly direction through rural farms and woodlands to the port city of Wilmington, seventy miles distant. The Atlantic Coast Line Railroad tracks, which run north from Wilmington to Weldon near the [Virginia](#) line, extends along the eastern section of the historic district. The tracks form a wide curve as they pass through Faison. The streets generally follow an orthogonal pattern except for East and West Center streets which flank the railroad tracks and conform to their bending course, and East and West Main streets which crisscross the town at a slight angle. Beyond the city limits, rural roads spread outward in a meandering pattern into the surrounding countryside.

The Faison Historic District includes the industrial block containing the Cates Pickle Company on the north, and the central business district located along East and West Center streets on both sides of the railroad tracks, and along East and West Main streets which cross the railroad tracks. The Faison Historic District also contains several residential streets surrounding the business district including north-south Williams, Church, Forest, Sampson, Center, and Hill streets; north-south Faison Avenue; east-west College, Main, Mary and Elias, Thornton, and Solomon streets. Some of the streets form the Faison Historic District boundaries. The railroad right-of-way extends north-south through the district and is contained within a continuous grassy plaza that runs through the town. East and West Center streets (U.S. Highway 117) parallel to the tracks, and East and West Main streets (N.C. Highway 403) which traverse the tracks, are remnants of former coaching roads that intersected in the midst of the community. They now delineate the business center, and divide the surrounding blocks into residential quadrants.

From its inception in 1833 until the advent of the railroad in 1840, Faison and other similar farming communities were accessible by coaching roads or the Northeast Cape Fear River. The railroad had a tremendous impact on the region because it formed a direct link between the port of Wilmington and northern markets, provided safe and fast service for perishable goods, and affected the growth and welfare of the once-isolated towns. The economic prosperity generated by the railroad in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries is evident today in the variety of architectural resources in the historic district, from commercial buildings clustered near the tracks, to distinctive residences on tree-lined lots in the adjacent blocks. The closely-arranged stores in the central business district are generally Commercial style buildings erected between 1900 and 1920, are one- and two-stories high, and feature decorative brick panels and cornices in the upper facades. Three exceptions are the c.1850-70 Moore Lee Thornton Store (205 West Main Street), the oldest commercial structure in the Faison Historic District and an extremely rare example of a false-front frame building; the c.1900 C.S. Hines Store (108 West Center Street), heavily altered at the first level but retaining an original pressed-metal facade in the upper story that is unique in the county; the 1931 (and later) Charles F. Cates and Sons, Inc. Pickle Plant, which combines industry and commerce in a large complex of structures; and the 1933 Clifton's Service Station (203 West Main Street), a Mission-style building reflecting a design popularized during the 1920s and 1930s by nationally syndicated oil companies. Examples of single-story brick stores are the Faison Pharmacy (108-112 West Main Street); the former Ford Motor Company Building (202 West Main Street); the McColman-Morton Building (214 West Main Street); and Southerland's Grocery (209-211 West Main Street) with peaked and semicircular parapets forming a dramatic silhouette.

Of the two-story type, only two remain: the c.1900 Commercial Building (112 West Center Street) incorporating segmentally arched windows at the upper level, and the 1915 Witherington Building (102-106 West Main Street) which anchors the northwest corner of Center and Main streets and has a chamfered corner containing a store entrance. Two frame warehouses border the railroad tracks, recalling the importance of the town as a rail distribution point for locally-grown farm produce. The 1888 Faison Depot (106 North Forest Street) originally stood in the plaza just north of the intersection of East and West Main streets and the tracks. It was moved in 1977 to a new location in the town park and adapted for use as the Faison

Library with its interior fittings preserved. Nearby, the 1918 Victorian Gothic style Presbyterian Church (502 West Main Street) retains its original exterior and interior finishes and stained glass windows.

The residential area containing one- and two-story frame homes surrounding and closely integrated with the business center are historically associated with Faison's local merchants and professionals. The oldest dwelling is the c.1850, [Greek Revival](#) style, Elias Faison House (North Faison Avenue), built for the founder of the town. The first Aubyne Lewis House (203 North Forest Street), the 1874 J.B. King House (206 North Faison Avenue), and the 1888 Dr. John M. Faison House (SE Center Street) are of the transitional Greek Revival-Italianate style. The [Italianate](#) style is exemplified by the 1853 Faison-Williams House (701 West Main Street), the 1873-74 Thomas Perrett House (305 West Main Street), the c.1880 Walter Livingston Hicks House (304 West Main Street), the 1890 W.E. Hill House (200 East Main Street) and Isham Faison Hill House (202 East Main Street). The [Queen Anne](#) style is represented by the 1880 Witherington House (407 West Main Street), the c.1900 Robert Southerland House (216 South Forest Street), and a residence of similar design at 124 South Sampson Street.

The widely-popularized [Bungalow/Craftsman](#) style is illustrated by the 1919 Bryant Martin House (501 West Main Street), the c.1920 Lingle House (South Faison Avenue), and the c.1930 Newton House (112 North Faison Avenue).

A unique residential structure at the southeastern edge of the Faison Historic District is the c.1890 W.E. Hill Servants' Quarters, now attached to the Fesperman House (Southeast Center Street). It is the only surviving servants' house in town and is highlighted by an overshot, gabled roof that extends out over the lower walls of the structure.

In summary, the Faison Historic District includes a noteworthy assemblage of both commercial and residential buildings that are closely associated with the historic and architectural development of a farming and market town in the inland coastal plain of North Carolina. The impact of the railroad on the commerce and welfare of Faison during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries is evident in the densely developed business blocks on nearby West Main Street which contain an extremely rare and early example of a false-front, frame store (c.1850-70), as well as c.1900 to 1920, one- and two-story, Commercial style buildings. Many of the store fronts preserve their original display windows, wood or brick aprons, and recessed entrances. Virtually all the upper facades are intact and feature decorative brick panels and cornices. The blocks adjacent to the railroad tracks from Mary and Elias Street north to the pickle plant are less compact in their arrangement and combine both residential and commercial buildings.

The resources in the residential blocks adjacent to the business area are also indicative of the commerce and welfare of Faison during the mid-nineteenth to early twentieth centuries. They include homes built from c.1850 to 1930 which represent prevailing architectural fashions of each period, including Greek Revival, transitional Greek Revival-Italianate, Italianate, Queen Anne, and Bungalow/Craftsman styles. The single and multi-story dwellings line tree-shaded streets bordered by sidewalks. The large lots, some comprising most of a block, create a picturesque setting for the residences surrounded by front and side yards, gardens, and associated outbuildings including storage sheds, carriage houses, garages, and barns. The houses are enhanced by a wide assortment of architectural details; some have decorative sawn work on porches, eaves, and gables; others have Bungalow/Craftsman angular brackets.

The close alliance of the commercial and residential areas of the Faison Historic District manifests the strong kinship of business and home life that is a particular historical characteristic of this small, Duplin County community, a characteristic that is still bound together by agriculture, the highway, the river, and the railroad.

Of a total of 172 resources in the Faison Historic District, forty-nine per cent are contributing buildings, twenty-four per cent are noncontributing buildings, twenty per cent are contributing outbuildings, structures or objects, and seven per cent are noncontributing outbuildings, structures or objects.

Significance

The Faison Historic District is eligible for the National Register of Historic Places in the areas of commerce, industry, and community development; and also for architecture. The importance of commerce in the Faison Historic District is illustrated both by the railroad and by the cohesive, remarkably intact stores and houses that reflect the expanding economic prosperity of Faison during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. A strong sense of community development is manifested by the close relationship between the commercial and residential blocks, as well as by some of the best examples of architecture in the county. Notable commercial structures range from the c.1850-70 Moore Lee Thornton Store, an extremely rare, one-story, false-front frame building which preserves all of its original exterior and interior details; the 1888 Faison Depot, one of the oldest stations in the county, which continues to serve the community as a library; two, c.1900, frame warehouses adjacent to the railway right-of-way which are reminders of the interdependence of the produce markets and the railroad; the c.1900, Southerland's Grocery, enlivened by a brick facade that climaxes in peaked and semicircular parapets; and the 1915, two-story, brick, Witherington Building, with chamfered corner, corbels, and bracketed cornices, that dominates the commercial center. Among exemplary examples of residential architecture are the c.1850, Greek Revival style, Elias Faison House, the earliest dwelling in Faison; the c.1874, transitional Greek Revival-Italianate style J.B. King House, with two-story porch; the imposing Faison-Williams House (1853), a grand, Italianate-style plantation home with lacy brackets accentuating the double-gallery porch; the c.1890, Isham Faison Hill House, a dramatic Italianate villa with projecting porch bays, paired windows, and a tripartite, arched window above the central entrance; the 1880, Queen Anne style Witherington House, an imposing, L-shaped home with clustered posts supporting a one-story front porch, and tall, angled end bays featuring fan brackets and rammats beneath flared roof overhangs; and the 1919, Bungalow/Craftsman style, Bryant

Martin House, whose open and expansive site compliments its broad architectural lines.

Historical Background/Commerce, Industry, and Community Development

The coastal plain of southeastern North Carolina, which extends inland to the headwaters of the Northeast Cape Fear River, was first populated by white settlers in the first quarter of the eighteenth century. The area lay within the boundaries of New Hanover County, but the large size of the territory and the gradual colonization of the region brought about the establishment of Duplin County as a separate entity in 1749 (McGowen, 1971: 469-70). Among the first landowners here were the Hicks, Hill, and Bowden families who large tracts of land in the vicinity of Goshen Swamp and established plantations to tap the resources of the valuable Carolina pines for the production of naval stores: tar, pitch and turpentine (Ainsley, 1994: 7). In 1774, Henry Faison ventured into the area where present-day Faison stands, purchased a 975-acre tract on the south side of Goshen Swamp, and began a successful career as a planter and naval stores producer (Ainsley: 8). Each of the plantations was an entity in itself, making clothing from flax and cotton grown in the fields, raising cattle, vegetables and fruit for personal consumption, and shipping naval stores down river to the port of Wilmington. (Williams and Witherington, 1949). The economic prosperity of the region brought about business and social contacts among plantation families, and the area became known as "the Acropolis of Society" because of the quality of life and social refinement enjoyed there (Ainsley: 8). Through the late eighteenth century and into the first decade of the twentieth century, most of the lands in the northwestern corner of the county were held and husbanded by families and descendants of the original settlers (Ainsley: 8; Map of Faison, 1912).

The main routes of trade in western Duplin County during its formative years were the Northeast Cape Fear River to the east of Faison's land, and the old coach road that skirted it on the west. In the 1830s and 1840s, however, changes became apparent with the advent of the railroad into the county. Faison's Depot was established in 1833, anticipating the arrival of rail service, and, in 1840, the new line reached the town. Originally chartered in 1834 as the Wilmington and Raleigh Railroad Company, the route was intended to connect the port city of Wilmington with the state capital at [Raleigh](#). But the scheme was soon abrogated because of disagreements between Wilmington and Raleigh backers. The line was redirected to Weldon at the northern border of the state where it connected with the Petersburg Railroad; the company name was changed to Wilmington and Weldon Railroad in 1855 (McGowen, 471; Casteen, 1987: 25). The curve of the tracks through Faison is partly due to this alteration of the route and partly due to a more accessible crossing of the Goshen Swamp north of the town (Ainsley: 12).

The Civil War had an impact on Duplin County because of the importance of the railroad, which General Robert E. Lee referred to as the "Lifeline of the Confederacy." Despite physical and economic strife during and after the war, the region recovered rapidly, and, by 1870, Faison's Depot was surveyed, the town was laid out in a grid pattern, and thirty-one lots were sold by the following year (Ainsley: 12; *Wilmington Star*, 1871). The business district flanking the railroad consisted of sixty-six foot lots, while those extending away from the center of town averaged 165 by 190 feet. The east-west streets were named College, Goshen, Main, Elias and Mary, and Parker (now William Thornton); the north-south streets became Church, Forest, Faison, Sampson, Railroad (now East and West Center streets), Hill, and Fremont (Map of Faison, 1886). Promotional articles in Wilmington newspapers touted the town as "a healthy and pleasant place," and the people as "high-toned and refined." In 1872 the town was incorporated as Faison (*Wilmington Star*, 1871; 1872).

The 1880s introduced the strongest period of agricultural activity in the region when scientific farming practices aimed at creating a "winter garden" in the south to serve northern markets superseded the former production of naval stores, cotton and tobacco (Ainsley: 14). In 1886, the railroad built a spur line just north of the Faison Depot, to connect with the Sampson County seat of Clinton, miles to the west (Ainsley: 123). Four years later, the company erected a continuous sheltered platform along the track at Faison to protect the produce brought in by farmers and loaded aboard the trains by shipping brokers (Ainsley: 14). By the early twentieth century, the vegetable market exceeded all other activities and tenant farmers began to buy up available acreage for production of farm staples. During the 1920s and 1930s, local and out-of-state buyers populated the Faison market and brought increased demand on farm production. Some dealers, called "by-line buyers," dealt directly with the growers at the farms, thus avoiding the competition and congestion at the city market. In the 1940s, the city site yielded to a new Faison Produce Market a mile west of town (Ainsley: 14-15).

In addition to the produce market, an economic force in Faison was and remains the cucumber and pickle industry. The Cates Pickle Company, founded in 1898 by Charles F. Cates in the north central part of the state, moved to Faison in 1929, and completed their facility two years later. The plant augmented local employment and increased the economic and general welfare of the area (Ainsley: 16-17).

In the late twentieth century, Faison continues to be an important vegetable farming and food manufacturing town. Its fruit and vegetable exchange is the second largest in America and the third largest in the world. By truck and rail, vegetables are shipped to Canada, [Boston](#), [New York](#), [Detroit](#), and points west.

Faison's small town character, with a population under 1,100, preserves its rural town character because of the lack of population pressure. Although the railroad and U.S. Highway 117 pass through the heart of the city, the quiet ambience of the residential streets is still intact. Interstate Highway 40, from Wilmington to Raleigh and across the United States to [California](#), lies within three miles to the west of Faison, and provides additional access to and from the community. In addition, the modern highway gives the town an excellent opportunity to integrate farming with industries and businesses seeking new sites, while attracting visitors to experience the significant historical and architectural heritage of the region.

Architectural Context

The Faison Historic District contains a significant number of architectural resources dating from the mid-nineteenth century to the 1940s which represent popular commercial and residential styles of each successive period. The most noteworthy houses in the Faison Historic District are the large, two-story residences which exhibit Greek Revival, Italianate, or Queen Anne style elements such as double-story porches, square and turned posts and balustrades, brackets, and patterned shingles, dating from the antebellum period through the late nineteenth century. The consistently high quality of the designs is attributable to the presence of the railroad, since many of the structural and decorative elements were mass produced in urban factories, shipped by rail to regional building supply companies, and made available to local contractors. Many of the properties constitute large lots and incorporate outbuildings such as storage buildings, garages and single examples of a kitchen (202 Mary and Elias Street) and the W.E. Hill servants' quarters. The commercial architecture ranges from the frame, false-front Moore Lee Thornton Store (205 West Main Street), a rare surviving example of a mid-nineteenth century store; the Faison Manufacturing Company (NE Center Street), and the former Ford Motor Company Building (202 West Main Street), featuring stepped parapets; and Southerland's Grocery (209-211 West Main Street), crowned by a parapet consisting of semicircular central arch flanked by two low-peaked copings. Buildings recalling the importance of the railroad include Brewer's Farm Service Warehouse and the Southern Produce Distributors Building skirting the railway right-of-way, and the Faison Depot (106 North Forest Street), moved from its original site just north of the intersection of Main Street and the railroad tracks to the town park. In addition, the Charles F. Cates and Sons Pickle Plant, at the northern limits of town, represents the continuing role agriculture and industry play in the community.